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Safety net wears thin for Rhode Islanders hitting 24-month welfare limit

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Amanda Choinere, 22, of Pawtucket, a single mother, faces the loss of benefits through the Rhode Island Works program.

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PROVIDENCE — Amanda Choiniere is a single mother on welfare. And she is fighting to stay busy.

The 22-year-old Pawtucket native studies bookkeeping at Rhode Island College for six hours every Monday, Tuesday and Friday. She spends Wednesdays and Thursdays at an internship in the business office of Monster Mini Golf.

But the training program — and her \$449 monthly welfare payments — are coming to an end.

“I didn’t go on welfare to get free money. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to get a job,” she said between classes at Rhode Island College last week. “But without having money, I would not have any way to live, or any way to provide for my daughter.”

Choiniere and 1-year-old Rose are among 850 Rhode Island families — including an estimated 1,200 children — scheduled to lose cash assistance and job training in the midst of Rhode Island’s worst economic downturn in decades. They are the first to hit the state’s new 24-consecutive-month limit in the welfare overhaul pushed by [Governor Carcieri](#) and approved by the [General Assembly](#) in 2008.

The new limits, set in a program named Rhode Island Works, are among the most stringent in the nation. And they were approved, social welfare advocates note, when the state's unemployment rate was 7.5 percent. It now exceeds 12 percent.

Most of the 850 families were cut off July 1. The state has granted some, including Choiniere, a temporary three-month extension.

Even before these reductions, there were fewer Rhode Island families on cash assistance than ever before. The state Department of Human Services reported 6,795 families in the program at the end of March. That's down more than 30 percent from the 9,874 families at the beginning of 2008, despite the worsening economy.

"We take this issue very seriously. The economy is a challenge. And we're very sympathetic to the situation," said Deborah Buffi, associate director of the state Department of Human Services.

State officials may grant temporary hardship extensions on a case-by-case basis, but often they have little option but to enforce time limits in the updated law.

Choiniere and others were nearly granted a reprieve last month, however.

The state Senate approved a bill in the part-time legislature's final hours that would have postponed the new 24-month limit for one year, but the measure died in the House.

"I told the finance folks to look into it — I didn't even know that it came over from the Senate — we were trying to work something out," House Speaker Gordon D. Fox said in a recent interview. "It's something that concerns me. I believe in the safety net ... But there's a balance between, you want to have a safety net, but you can't be on the safety net for an eternity."

Indeed, state and federal policymakers have fiercely debated the balance between the need for safety-net programs, the fear of dependency and cost to taxpayers.

And while she has been receiving payments for 24 consecutive months, Choiniere's experience suggests that the state has struggled to provide staffing and resources used to justify the new time limits.

"The termination of the families because of the 24-month time limit highlights the deep flaws in the design and implementation of the Rhode Island Works program," said Linda Katz, policy director for the Rhode Island Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College.

Choiniere was four months pregnant when she lost her cashier's job at a local restaurant — the result, she says, of complications related to the pregnancy.

Having been at the job for a short time, she only briefly qualified for unemployment insurance. Even after the money ran out, and it became clear that Rose's father could not contribute financially, then 20-year-old Choiniere resisted asking the state for help.

“I didn’t want to go on welfare,” she said. “I was raised in a stereotypical atmosphere where you don’t do that. You work.”

Fear and shame delayed her welfare application by two months. But she began collecting checks shortly before Rose, her first and only child, was born.

Like all people enrolled in the state’s new welfare program, Choiniere was referred to a “one-stop” job center, a resource outlined in the updated law. Long before there was talk of additional education or training programs, she spent four weeks improving interviewing skills, crafting a resumé and searching online job boards.

All enrollees must submit a weekly record of job-search activities. The program doesn’t offer bus vouchers or other subsidized transportation assistance. Nor does it offer childcare assistance initially.

“I only had the bus,” Choiniere said. “And it’s hard to take the bus and interview with a young child. But I did it.”

Under the new law, the “one-stop” centers are supposed to offer job-development services through the state Department of Labor and Training, in addition to related social-welfare services through the Department of Human Services.

Largely because of staffing shortages, Choiniere had little contact with human services staffers at first.

“There was an initial design in the law that DHS would be co-located with DLT at those one-stops. The DLT was pretty well able to staff up. The DHS was not,” said Diane Cook, administrator of family and adult services for the Department of Human Services.

Indeed, there was just one DHS worker on hand during a recent visit to a bustling one-stop center on Reservoir Avenue.

For months, Choiniere, a Davies Career and Technical High School graduate, said she was pushing to find training or education programs to help become more marketable. She was told nothing was available.

It wasn’t until she had been on welfare for more than a year that a DHS social worker helped guide her to the bookkeeping certificate program at Rhode Island College.

“I was very angry with them,” Choiniere said. “If I had known earlier, I’d probably have a job by now.”

She is fighting to stay optimistic.

Choiniere’s bookkeeping course ends in less than a month. There are no more training programs in sight. And her temporary welfare extension expires at the end of September.

State officials encourage her and anyone else hitting the new time limit to apply for another three-month hardship extension if necessary.

“Those 850 clients of ours that are closing are clearly entitled to a hardship. And the lack of finding work is something that fits our criteria,” says Buffi, of the Department of Human Services.

But Choiniere said she hopes to find a better revenue stream before September; she’s barely able to pay \$250 each month for rent with the \$449 monthly welfare check.

“Then I have to buy diapers, wipes,” she says. “And kids go through shoes so quickly ... I asked classmates for old summer clothes.”

She smiles nervously when asked about her future.

“I’m still looking,” she says. “I’m still hoping to hear back from someone.”

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